

The Truest Crime Story

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Date: 10 March 2024

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- [0 : 0 0] Brilliant. Thanks so much, Alistair. If we haven't met, my name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. Let me add my welcome to that of JT. It's great to have you with us this morning. And in particular, it's brilliant to be opening God's word together. Do get that open in front of you.
- It's on page 1086 of the few Bibles. If you've got one in front of you, that would be great. We would love to allow God to speak this morning, to let his word speak much louder and much clearer than mine. And let me pray to that end. Heavenly Father, I pray that as you speak to us this morning, we would have ears to hear and hearts to receive what it is that you have to say.
- I pray that you would be at work by your Holy Spirit, helping us to see Jesus this morning, that he might increase, that I might decrease. Indeed, that we might see how great you are.
- In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Why is it that we are so fascinated with stories about crime? It's true. If you look at the charts, fiction book charts, lots of the top selling books are crime thrillers, detective novels, that sort of thing. It's the same with TV. It's the same with podcasts. With podcasts, it's actually true crime stories about things that have really happened. That's the most popular genre of podcasts by quite a long way. That storyline, I guess, really is about guilt and innocence, about who done it.
- And we're fascinated by it, aren't we? One of our favorite games to play at embassy with the teenagers is Mafia. If you don't know what Mafia is, ask one of the teenagers. We might even play it with them this morning. But we play that game because we love that storyline, guilt and innocence, who done it.
- [1 : 5 7] For me, it's always been the Sherlock Holmes stories. I think Conan Doyle is just one of the best in this genre. Definitely, I'm drawn to the genius of the detective. But also, I think, by wanting to get to the truth. Who is guilty? Who is innocent? What really happened? What's really going on?
- So psychologists have labored over this question. Why are we so fascinated by that story? What is it about the true crime genre in particular that we find so gripping? And there are lots of theories.
- Of course there are. But I wonder if something in us just really wants to know the truth and to see justice done. You'll get this with basically any crime story. I think there are sort of two types of crime story. There's the sort where we're in the dark. We maybe know there's been a crime. We might even know what the crime is, but we don't know who did it. We're in the dark.
- And a good story will lead us down various paths at different moments. Was it Professor Plum or Colonel Mustard? We just want to know what's true. Maybe that's a familiar storyline. There's also this sort of story where we do know exactly what's going on, actually.

We know who is guilty. We know who is innocent. And as we watch, we're crying out for justice to be done, to see the guilty party punished and to see the innocent go free. And this passage in John, it's a bit like that second sort of storyline. Jesus's trial, there's something especially jarring about it. If we've been following along in this series in John, I guess even if we haven't, we probably know, don't we, that Jesus is innocent. He hasn't committed any crime.

[3 : 39] And yet here he is on trial to be executed. It's the ultimate true crime thriller story, and particularly thrilling when read so well by Alistair. As we approach it together, it's worth just remembering that we're coming up to Easter. And in this story, we actually move on to the day, Good Friday, in this passage. The passage that we're in today, we actually enter the very same day that Jesus goes to the cross to die. What we're coming to here is the day that all of history actually revolves around. Revolves around that day because we'll see at the cross, everything changes, right? As Jesus, the God become man, that he goes to the cross to take our place, to die the death that we deserve to die. In that moment, he paid the price to redeem all of creation from the curse of sin. And so what we're coming to this morning, it's massive. It's the day that history revolves around. This is the true crime story of all true crime stories as the innocent man is on trial.

And it's building all the tension for us as we build up to Easter. You know, we often spend maybe one week, maybe a weekend, maybe more often than not just one day thinking about this particularly massive event. But notice how much the narrative has slowed down in John's gospel, right? The first half of this book, right up to the end of chapter 11, literally covers years of Jesus's life.

And then the entire second half of the book from chapter 12, right to the end covers less than a week. The story of Easter takes up half of this book. And it's been wonderful for me anyway, and hopefully for you too, to slow down with John, to spend time with Jesus in his final days like this.

And so let's just intentionally over the next few weeks in the run up to Easter, appreciate this wonderful opportunity to deliberately prepare our hearts and our minds for what is coming.

And to spend time, as I say, with Jesus now in the final hours before his death. With that in mind, as we look at this text, I think there are sort of two acts in the drama, if you like. You might think of it like going to see a play at the theatre. Act one is from verses 15 to 28. And then act two from verses 28 to 40. And we'll see that each act contains three scenes.

[6 : 21] So the acts, they kind of mirror one another in that way. So come with me as we enter the drama. Act one, act one, scene one, here we are. We're in the high priest's courtyard.

I've got some slides here. Probably someone well acquainted with ancient architecture knows that they're completely inaccurate. And they're just there to sort of help us picture the scene. Don't worry about them too much. But this is the high priest's courtyard. And we touched on this scene last week, verses 15 to 19. Jesus, he's been arrested by the Romans in the garden on behalf of the Jewish authorities. See there in verse 15, high priest's courtyard. We'll see this is Annas' house. And he's actually not the high priest at the time. Instead, under the Roman occupation, there are kind of like a few wealthy families who had come to dominate the office of high priest.

And Annas was kind of like the godfather figure of that gang, if you like. He had been the high priest. Now his son-in-law, we'll see, holds the office. But really, he's the big boss. He's the power behind the throne. And so take yourself there. You're in his courtyard. Whatever a fancy first Jerusalem home might look like, I imagine it a bit like this. I don't know. And Peter, you'll see he has to wait outside until the other disciple, that's probably John, the guy who writes the gospel, persuades them to let Peter in. And then comes that famous denial. We touched on it last week. Notice verse 17. The servant girl just asks a very direct question. You aren't one of the man's disciples too, are you? I am not. See the detail in verse 18. John tells us it's cold. Put yourself there. Can you feel it? It's cold. They're gathered around a fire to keep warm. You might imagine they're probably huddled quite closely together. And we'll come back to denial in act one, scene three. But for now, there's scene one in the high priest's courtyard. Scene two, come with me, takes us inside Annas' house, or maybe in a kind of portico or cloister, maybe like this. Again, take yourself there.

You might like to put yourselves in the shoes of Peter. You're in the courtyard. You can see Jesus being questioned through the columns or through the door. And see how Jesus answers his questioners in verses 20 and 21. He says, you've no need to question me. I haven't hidden anything.

I haven't said anything secretly. You can ask anyone who's heard me. They'll tell you what I've taught. And then, bosh, right? Verse 22, one of the officials slaps Jesus right across the face. Just think how ridiculous a moment that is. This man is literally slapping God in the face.

[9 : 07] But maybe figuratively, there are ways that we do that too. If you're not a Christian here this morning, maybe especially for you, if you don't believe in God at all, and maybe you just think it's ridiculous to claim that this man, a random Middle Eastern man from 2,000 years ago, there's no way that his claims at being God could possibly be true. If that's you, can I urge you to just keep digging? Keep asking your questions. It's wonderful that you're here. But especially come to your Bible, come to the Bible with those questions. It's my experience that the more questions I ask of this book, the more amazed I am at its coherence and its ability to bear the weight of my questioning.

Because so long as we remain in that place, ignorant of the God who created us, rejecting his mission to save us, so long as we do that, we, just like the official here, we slap him square in the face.

And so come back to the scene with me. Imagine Peter's there. He's watching at a distance. Up to this point, Peter has been following Jesus, and there have been some tight situations. We've seen them in John's Gospel, but Jesus has always found a way through. But for Peter now, as he sees for the first time the physical humiliation of Jesus, things are beginning to get very real. Mike Tyson, the boxer, famously said, everyone's got a plan until they get punched in the face. Imagine Peter is beginning to get very scared. It doesn't look like Jesus is in control anymore. It looks like the plan is falling apart.

But for Jesus, he's taken this blow. And look, for most people, I guess Tyson is right, isn't he? If I get slapped like that, any kind of plan, any kind of control in that situation just goes straight out of the window.

But that is not the case for Jesus. He remains in control. Speaking against the high priest, like he has, was a genuine offense. But it wasn't wrong to speak the truth. And he testifies there to his innocence. And then Annas, I guess at a loss is what to do, the big boss, he sends him to Caiaphas.

[11 : 17] He's his son-in-law, like I said, the man who currently holds the actual office of high priest. And with that, verse 24, scene two closes. And we're straight into scene three, back into the courtyard. We've gone courtyard, into the house, back into the courtyard. Verse 25, Peter's still there warming himself by the fire. Again, you might imagine him huddled closely around with the others. And again, the very same question, you aren't one of his disciples too, are you? Now you can imagine that he's been regretting that first denial bitterly. He is one of Jesus's disciples. He loves Jesus. He promised actually in John's gospel just yesterday that he'd go to prison for him, that he'd even die for him. But he's just seen Jesus being slapped. It's all feeling very real. He's scared. And again, he denies it. I am not. And then it gets worse as someone else there recognizes him.

Worse than that, it's a relative of the guy whose ear Peter had cut off. If you remember last week, verse 10 of this chapter, Peter cut off this guy's ear in the garden. And again, Peter's challenged, didn't I see you with him in the garden? In other words, I know exactly who you are.

But now Peter is so deep into his lie. And again, he denies it. The rooster crows, just as Jesus said that it would. And the curtain comes down on scene three. It's the end of act one.

Time for a quick interval for us then. And so it's worth just pausing here as we reflect on act one. And especially revisiting, I think, some of what Graham said last week as we think about the ways that we deny Jesus. It'll be different for each and every one of us. It would be great, actually, to talk about ways that this works out for you in your growth groups this week.

We might betray him just like Peter does. You get that question? You're not one of those Christians, are you? What, me? It might be very direct like that, but it might be very subtle, simple, given the opportunity to speak up, to defend Jesus when others are mocking him, simply to stand up for what Christians believe is true when people are speaking out against it.

[13 : 39] It might not be what we say or don't say at all, but simply how we live, our actions, denying that we're followers of Jesus, when we ignore those who are in need to just keep on walking on by.

It's much easier, isn't it, to just go with the crowd, to do what everyone else is doing, maybe to have one beer too many, another glass of wine. It could be something like that.

If someone watched a video recording of everything that you did yesterday, would they know that you were a follower of Jesus? Jesus. And just like Peter, every time we deny him, every time we fail to speak up for him, it gets harder not to do the same next time.

And so just one practical thing for you, maybe especially if you're, I don't know, starting a new job or if you move to a new city, maybe you're new to Edinburgh, or if you join a new team or have a new group of friends, you find yourself in a new setting, it's so helpful to nail your colours to the mast as early as you can.

If Peter hadn't denied Jesus that first time, he wouldn't have done it again, and he wouldn't have done it again. And so the first opportunity you get, I am with Jesus. How do you do that?

[15 : 04] Well, maybe just very simply, you could tell them about your weekend, tell them you went to church on Sunday. One of Katie, my wife, one of her tutors at university, she noticed this a couple of weeks ago.

One of her tutors has a Bible verse in her profile picture. Just a very simple way of letting people know, I am with Jesus. And a massive encouragement that was for Katie. You might be surprised as you nail your colours to the mast.

Just who else around you might be a follower of Jesus too. Who has yet to do the same. Could you encourage them in that way? The longer you leave it, the more you deny him, the harder it will be to make that stand when the time comes.

And more generally, as we spend time during this interval, dwelling on the ways that we have denied Jesus, I hope you can see that as John tells the true crime story, on the surface it looks as though it is Jesus who is on trial, who is being questioned.

But really, in Act 1, what we've just seen, it's not Jesus who is on trial there, but Peter. Peter is on trial for his denial.

[16:10] And I'm on trial for mine. And you are for yours too. And honestly, we cannot possibly hope to be found completely innocent in this, can we?

There are ways that all of us deny Jesus. But stay with me, because there is good news for the guilty here. Come with me to Act 2.

Act 2, we're now in the palace of the Roman governor. If you remember in verse 24, at the end of Act 1, scene 2, Annas has sent Jesus to Caiaphas. And now in verse 28, he's taken straight from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor.

John isn't concerned with what happened with Caiaphas. We know from the other gospels that he was first tried informally by him, and then formally by the whole Sanhedrin, the kind of Jewish ruling council.

But now he's being taken. See verse 28. It's early in the morning. Again, take yourself there. This is now Good Friday, the day of the cross. And he's being taken to the Roman governor.

[17:13] Caiaphas and his Jewish pals, they won't enter the palace. Notice the irony here. It says, John tells us that they won't enter the palace because then they'd be unclean for the ongoing Passover festival.

The irony, of course, is they worry and fuss over the minutia of the law is that they're delivering its author over to death. And so they remain outside.

And this is where the action of Act 2, scene 1, takes place. We're in a courtyard again, maybe a slightly different one, maybe a little bit fancier, looks like this. And Pilate, he's the Roman governor, he comes out to them and he asks them, see in verse 29, what charges are you bringing against this man?

And they don't really have an answer. I mean, of course they don't. Jesus is innocent. And so they simply say, verse 30, basically they're saying, he's a criminal, you should just trust us. He's a criminal. If he's a criminal, then why won't you charge him yourself, asked Pilate?

Because we cannot execute him, they reply. And that was quite true. The Jewish leaders under Roman authority, they didn't have the power to order execution by law, but execution is what they wanted.

[18:24] And so they handed him over to Rome. You can do our dirty work for us. He's guilty, trust us. And John tells us there in verse 32, all this, it took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

Because of course, Jesus had said that he would be crucified. And that was the Roman method of execution. And that's a key verse for us. Maybe keep that in your back pocket. We'll come back to it as we put this whole thing together.

But that's the end of act two, scene one. We've been in the courtyard. And scene two begins in verse 33, through the keyhole. We're now inside the palace. And Pilate summons Jesus for questioning.

He says, are you king of the Jews? That's an interesting question. It could mean one of two things. If he's asking from a Roman perspective, the question is like this.

Are you setting yourself up in opposition to Rome? Are you claiming to be like a Jewish political leader, the head of a rebellion? On the other hand, if it's a question from the Jewish perspective, it's a, are you the long awaited Messiah?

[19 : 36] Are you the king who has come to establish an everlasting and eternal kingdom for your people? Are you claiming to be a sort of spiritual king? The Roman question is a political one.

The Jewish question is a spiritual one. And so Jesus asks in verse 34, is that your own idea? In other words, is that a Roman question? Or did others talk to you about me?

In other words, is it a Jewish question? And notice Pilate just deflects. He says, am I a Jew? And then he changes his line of questioning in verse 35. Just directly asks, well, what is it you have done?

And this is just the most ridiculous question, isn't it? In our true crime story, if you think about the whole story of John's gospel, what has Jesus done? He's turned water into wine.

He's healed the sick. He's fed the crowd. He's given sight to the blind. He's even raised the dead. What has Jesus done? But notice that's not how he defends himself.

[20 : 39] Instead, he speaks of his kingdom. He's really answering Pilate's first question. Are you a king? And he says that he does have a kingdom, a kingdom that is not of this world.

Notice verse 36. That means that his servants didn't fight to prevent his arrest. Just a brief aside, as we come out of the play for a second, there is a lesson in that for us, I think.

We tend to imagine that if we could just get evangelical Christians into the halls of power, into government or the media or the top FTSE 100 companies or whatever it is, if we could only return to a time when the church was respected and had real influence, then we would see revival, right?

Then we would see people return to church. That's not how his kingdom grows because his kingdom is not of this world. That's not to say that it would be a bad thing for the Christian influence in this country to grow.

I trust that would be a very good thing. But it is not the means by which his kingdom will grow. Peter got that quite wrong, didn't he, when he cut the man's ear off.

[21 : 47] Jesus' kingdom is not one that is extended at the point of a sword, for it is a spiritual kingdom. It will not grow by any sort of worldly power.

His kingdom is not of this world. You are a king then, Pilate responds back in our drama, verse 37. Now, I'm no Greek scholar at all.

I do read people who are, and they would tell me that the you here is emphatic. In other words, he's saying, you, scruffy, crownless, handcuffed man, you whose followers deny you, who has been handed over to me by your own people, you, a carpenter from Nazareth.

You call yourself a king. You say that I am, Jesus replies, still in verse 37. In fact, Jesus says that the reason I was born and came into the world, notice that is a very unusual way to speak, isn't it?

I was born and you were born, but we did not come into the world as though we had existed beforehand in some other place. But Jesus, he's eternal. He wasn't simply born, but he came into the world.

[23 : 00] And he says that he came into the world for a purpose, to testify to the truth. Now, when Jesus speaks of the truth here, it's not as we would often think of truth as simply the opposite of falsehood.

When I talk about truth, I'm usually referring to an abstract concept like that. That is something, usually a statement, that corresponds accurately to reality.

Jesus uses the word quite differently, not as an abstract concept, but as a personal quality, a characteristic. It's not just Jesus who does this. That's really how the Bible employs truth.

In fact, words for truth, especially in the Old Testament, are often translated in our English translations like faithfulness or reliability or trustworthiness. They're personal qualities.

And more often than not, those words are used to describe God, a God who is faithful, a God who is reliable and trustworthy.

[23 : 59] Yes, a God who does not lie, cannot lie. It's his character. And most crucially, God who is consistent with his self-revelation. In other words, what he says about himself corresponds accurately to reality.

So you see, truth is not teaching about God so much as it is the revelation of God himself, of his character. And of course, Jesus is the ultimate expression of that.

He reveals God to us absolutely and truly. So he came to testify to the truth. In other words, to reveal what God is really like. Indeed, verse 37, Jesus's whole truth was to come and to be that truth on trial.

What is truth? Pilate retorts. Now that is not a deep philosophical statement from the Roman governor. It's not said in the same way as someone today might say, well, you have your truth.

I have my truth. Every truth is true. No, Pilate is simply bringing the conversation to an end here. He's saying it doesn't actually matter what is true. The truth is irrelevant. It's not going to help you here.

[25 : 12] He's not denying that there is an objective truth. He's just saying what that objective truth does not matter. And with that, the curtain comes down on scene two and enter scene three.

We're back in the Roman governor's courtyard. Second half of verse 38. Pilate heads back out to the Jewish crowd. Outside, remember they're outside to avoid ritual uncleanness because they want to do the Passover thing.

And Pilate says, I find no basis for a charge against him. In other words, he's innocent. According to Roman law, Jesus hasn't done anything wrong.

And I guess in this true crime thriller, we ought to be rejoicing. This is the big moment. As we watch on, the innocent man has been found to be innocent by the biggest power, the biggest player.

Justice is going to be done. Surely he's going to be set free. And yet, and I guess to avoid upsetting anyone, he gives the group in the courtyard the opportunity to make that decision for him.

[26 : 16] Verse 39. Do you want me to release the king of the Jews? And then comes the horrible plot twist. They do not want to see Jesus set free. They don't want to see the innocent man go free.

Instead, they shout, give us Barabbas. They would rather have, as the NIV rather politely puts it, a man who has taken part in an uprising. Between the gospels, they variously describe Barabbas as an insurrectionist, a robber, a criminal.

Lots of commentators basically think that he was a Jewish freedom fighter or a terrorist fighting the Roman occupation. Whatever he is, we know this, he's guilty.

Jesus is innocent. And yet it is the guilty man that they want to be free. There's another brilliant irony here from John. For Barabbas' name means son of the father.

So you see the pretender goes free as the true son of the father takes his place. And so the drama ends. End of scene three.

[27 : 21] End of act two. End of this episode of the true crime drama. So let's just quickly recap. Act one takes place at Annas' house.

Annas represents the Jewish ruling classes. It goes from the courtyard into Annas' house and then back into the courtyard. And then act two, the action moves to the Roman governor's palace.

Pilate there represents the Roman empire. And again, it goes from courtyard through the keyhole, as it were, into the palace and then back into the courtyard. And all this, verse 32, took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

Two parallel acts in this drama, two trials, all taking place to fulfill God's plan. It's a true crime story leading us to Easter, making a way for Jesus to go to the cross.

It's true that we all love a true crime story because we desire justice. And this story is a massive injustice.

[28 : 32] It's the great injustice. In many ways, I think this chapter of John's gospel is a frustrating read. For Jesus, the innocent man, is being sent to the cross to die and Barabbas, the guilty man, is set free.

And yet, in God's plan, that is precisely the true crime drama that we needed. And this is where I want to land. As we look ahead to Golgotha, the hillside where Jesus was crucified, he's there, crucified, we're told, between two guilty men.

Two men described in exactly the same way as Barabbas is described. They are rebels, they are insurrectionists, they are freedom fighters just like him. They may have even been part of the same rebellion as Barabbas was.

There were three crosses for three guilty men. And so, as Jesus, utterly innocent, is there, hanging on the middle cross, we are supposed to think that is Barabbas' cross.

But we also have to think, I am Barabbas. Because we've seen, haven't we, that we're all guilty in one way or another.

[29 : 47] I began by talking about how much I love Sherlock Holmes, and there's this amazing story about the author, Arthur Conan Doyle. I actually don't think this story is true. I kind of wish it was, and you can probably imagine that it would be.

Apparently, he sent anonymous telegrams to 12 of his friends, important men. And the telegram simply said this, we are discovered, flee at once.

And within 24 hours, all 12 had left the country. Such were their guilty consciences. And whether that story is true or not, it is revealing, isn't it? Whether that would be enough to force us to flee the country or not, I imagine probably not.

But as we examine our own hearts, as we examine our own lives, as we are put on trial by the gospel this morning, we have to say that we are guilty.

There are ways that we've rejected Jesus just like the Jewish authorities did. There are ways, certainly, that we've denied him just like Peter. And so, ultimately, we have caused him to be crucified just like the Romans.

[30 : 53] None of us can stand trial and be declared innocent, and yet, this is the wonderful good news of the gospel. As Jesus takes Barabbas' cross, as the guilty man walks free, I am Barabbas, you are Barabbas.

The middle cross was my cross, and it was your cross. And Jesus, the innocent and true son of the father, he takes that cross, my cross, your cross, cross, as we are declared guilty, even as we are condemned, yet he takes our place, and we go free.

And so, we mustn't make the mistake that a friend of mine from rugby made this week. On Thursday, we were talking about him coming along to church one day, and he joked that if he did come, that he would walk through the doors of church, and he would probably burst into flames.

Knowing all that he's done, knowing how thoroughly he's rejected Christianity, he just has his eyes fixed on himself and his guilt. Let us not make that mistake.

If you're a Christian here this morning, and this is the invite of your not, take your eyes off yourself. Even as we've intentionally spent time thinking about our own guilt, as we've seen ourselves on trial, now, as Robert Murray Machain, the Scottish pastor from the 19th century, put it, for every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.

[32 : 26] Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief. If you feel yourself this morning to be even the chief of sinners, then look to Christ, and then look again, and then again, and keep on looking at him.

And then look again, one of the great ways that we do that is as we sing together, and we're about to close our service by doing exactly that. And as we do, let yourself be carried to that hillside, and behold the man upon the cross.

Let your mind's eye see him there, my sin upon his shoulders, and know all that he has done for you, the innocent in your place, so that finally we can sing together as we look to Easter, and let's really sing this together, I will boast in Jesus Christ, his death, and resurrection.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Jesus. Lord, that in your innocence we can go free.

Help us, Holy Spirit, be with us now. Help us, even as we sing together, to fix our eyes on Jesus, to take great comfort and great joy in the freedom that he has won for us in going to the cross.

[34 : 05] And Lord, would you cause us to keep our eyes on him as we eagerly await the resurrection of Easter. For we pray in his precious name.

Amen.